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AUTHOR Arnett, Ronald C.; Arneson, Pat
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ABSTRACT

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Educational Assessment as Invitation for Dialogue

Ronald C. Arnett
Duquesne University

Pat Arneson
University of Northern Colorado

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Please address correspondence regarding this manuscript to:

Pat Arneson
Department of Speech Communication
University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, CO 80639
Telephone: (970) 351-2045

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Abstract

Political legislation clearly indicates this is "the era of assessment." The assessment effort has deep intellectual roots within Western culture's Enlightenment ideal of *public* display and discussion of knowledge. However, a confounding of this cultural ideal occurs when a lack of communication between leaders in higher education and the public is propelled by a lack of understanding of the other's intellectual position on assessment. Interpersonal communication concepts related to dialogue suggest how we might invite dialogue with the public to achieve the highest quality of education that a community of discourse can envision.

Educational Assessment as Invitation for Dialogue

> The nature and quality of what students are learning in the nation's schools, colleges, and universities has been a source of concern and debate for over a decade. Legislators, parents, students and educators themselves have criticized public schools for low academic standards, high drop-out rates, quality of instruction, and the relevance of curricula to the needs of the work force and of society. Similarly, institutions of higher education have been criticized for poor student retention rates, inability to attract and retain minority students and faculty, insensitivity to issues of gender and ethnicity, inadequate preparation of students for the 'real world,' the increasing time it takes students to complete baccalaureate programs, the proliferation of tuition and related costs, the lack of accountability to the public for dollars spent, the quality of the educational product, time faculty members spent in activities other than teaching and so on. (Griffith, 1993, p. 1)

> Opinion polls leave no doubt that Americans have a profound respect for higher education. They consider it essential to the nation's civility and economic progress. . . . But, simultaneously, the polls reveal deep public concern about higher education. . . . Public confidence in the 'people running higher education' has declined as dramatically with respect to education leaders as it has with respect to the leadership of medicine, government and business. (Wingspread, 1993, p. 6)

As recently as 15 years ago, few people questioned the number of students our educational system did not reach. Since then, people have begun to formally question the effectiveness of the American educational system. Docherty, Morrison, and Tracey (1993) recognized communication scholars must be responsive to changing society. We must seek to understand social changes, establish a connection between ideas and policies, and participate in policy making and social questioning. Wartella (1994) reminded communication educators of our responsibility to become involved in public policy formulation. As professional educators, we can no longer separate ourselves from public discourse about education.

This paper offers a communicative foundation for viewing the act of assessment, not as an intrusion into the academy, but as an opportunity for dialogue with a larger public. Our

primary task is to apply dialogic interpersonal issues to a deeply controversial political issue on campus--assessment. Each political issue that besets any organizational environment needs to be placed within a context. The following section outlines the context in which educational assessment meets the college campus in the waning years of the 20th century. We outline the emergence of key educational reform policies and exhibit their influence on higher education. Upon conclusion of this brief summary, we identify ways in which dialogue can potentially turn a problematic situation into a genuine learning opportunity for both parties. Discussion which has emerged as a result of educational policy changes sets the stage for engaging in dialogue about assessment in higher education.

The Era of Assessment

The U.S. Department of Education (1992) noted, "American education has never had national standards. In the absence of national standards, a haphazard, accidental national curriculum has evolved based largely on standardized multiple-choice tests and mass-market textbooks" (p. 2). Educational leaders suggested this orientation emphasizes low-level skill development, "rather than the ability to solve problems and to apply learning to real-world situations" (p. 2). Currently, educators are in the process of changing the educational system from one that serviced the industrial age to one that will service the technological age. We offer a chronology of key policy developments at the national level, which inspired state K-12 reform, and influence change in higher education.

National Legislation

In 1983, Reagan administration Secretary of Education Terrell Bell released the

landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*, which offered a broad analysis of problems attendant to the American education system. The Business Roundtable, comprised of the chief executive officers of the top 200 corporations in the nation issued a similarly negative analysis (Galluzzo, 1994b).

In 1989, President Bush convened the nation's 50 Governors, who agreed that the nation must set ambitious education goals. They jointly established six goals, and included a pledge: By the year 2000, all American students will demonstrate competency in challenging subjects. The National Education Goals Panel was created soon afterward to monitor the nation's progress toward these goals (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1992).

In 1991, President Bush announced the AMERICA 2000 strategy to reach the goals, which called for the development of high standards and a national system of examinations. A few months later, Congress established the National Council on Education Standards and Testing, a bipartisan panel that recommended creating voluntary national standards and a voluntary national system of student assessments (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1992). Educators involved in the New Standards Project--a coalition of 17 states and nearly a half a dozen school districts enrolling nearly half the public-school students in the United States--began to develop content standards and field-test assessments.

In 1992, a partnership was formed between the U.S. Department of Labor and Education and the Office of Personnel Management. Together they began to develop assessment measures of workforce competencies and skills defined by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) (SCANS Report, 1992).

In 1994, President Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which codifies into law the original six National Education Goals and adds two goals which encourage parental participation and professional development of teachers. The bill also established in law the National Education Goals Panel, which will continue to report on the nation's progress toward meeting the national goals. The National Education Standards and Improvement Council was created, which will examine and certify voluntary national and state standards for content, student performance, opportunity-to-learn, and assessment systems. The legislation also created a National Skills Standards Board to stimulate the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of occupational skills standards and certification. The legislation supports a grants program to sustain and accelerate state and local efforts aimed at helping all students reach challenging academic standards (*Goals 2000*, 1994; Lieb, 1994).

The Clinton administration plans to use the standards and assessments legislation "to spearhead educational reform and to 'restructure education so that its main mission is performance'" (Clinton, 1993, p. A1). These national reforms led states to engage in educational reform. The state of Colorado serves as one example of how higher education is affected by national legislation.

Colorado Legislation

Advancements within the state of Colorado, for example, offer instruction about the importance of educational reform legislation for higher education. In 1991, concurrent with Bush's AMERICA 2000, The Colorado Achievement Commission was created by the state legislature to generate ideas for educational reform. "The goal is to ensure that Colorado's

schools have world-class standards which will enable today's students to compete in a world economy in the 21st century" ("Commission," 1993, p. A3). The Commission has initiated reforms across all levels of education.

In 1993, House Bill 93-1313 (HB 1313) was passed, mandating the implementation of standards-based education in the state's 178 school districts. The bill requires the State Board of Education to adopt content standards in 11 subjects, in two tiers. The first tier subjects are: reading/writing, math, science, history and geography. The second tier subjects are: economics, physical education, foreign languages, art, music, and economics. School districts were also required to adopt their own standards, which must meet or exceed those set by the state (Griffith, 1995; Kretschman, 1993).

"In addition to establishing standards, districts would be expected to develop new ways for students to demonstrate their skills--ways that go beyond traditional multiple-choice tests" ("Commission," 1993, p. A3). In authentic assessments, students are asked to apply what they know to situations, and then to evaluate how well they applied that knowledge. Students are asked to demonstrate how they would use information to solve a problem, or to resolve a dilemma, or to pose additional questions. Governor Roy Romer recognized HB 1313 as an important step forward for public education in the state: "This is basically asking the question, 'Why are we here? What are we here to do?'" ("Education," 1993, p. A1). Within the next few years, students from these secondary educational systems will graduate into institutions of higher education.

At a recent meeting of the Colorado Commission for Achievement in Education,

Governor Roy Romer advocated that Colorado students face college exit exams, as well as entrance tests. "The governor told the panel he is concerned about 'micromanaging' higher education by statute but felt entrance and exit examinations are necessary so the 'value added' benefits of education could be seen" ("Exit exams," 1995, p. A1). If funding were tied to testing programs, this would provide "powerful incentive" for colleges to raise educational outcomes. Romer also seeks to publish results, "so comparisons can be made, 'institution to institution'" (Hilliard, 1995, p. B1). The educational reform bill will be addressed in the 1996 session of the Colorado state legislature.

Persons interested in educational issues come together within this political context. Sherman (1991) reminded of the importance of "particulars" as we attempt to make good judgments and choices in life circumstances. She underscored the work of Aristotle (trans. 1985), which carefully differentiated between universal and particular understandings of truth. Unlike universal truth, particular truth is sensitive to contextual, historically situated knowledge. The ability to work with particulars, not universals, makes Aristotle's view of intelligence and phronesis--or practical discourse--possible. A wise communicator, interested in historically situated knowledge, opens dialogue with a discerning public by placing practical philosophical emphasis on the interpretation and application of communicative particulars understandable to a public audience.

Dialogue Within the Political Context

In this historical moment in higher education, the wise communicator needs to proactively encourage assessment as a base of dialogue with the public. By necessity, *the time*

has come to turn the "problem" of public intervention and questioning of higher education into an invitation for dialogue. The notions of assessment and historically situated knowledge are not antithetical companions in the pursuit of the elusive notion of "truth." Assessment is grounded in the American emphasis on knowledge being tied to action, pointed to by Emerson (1837) in *The American Scholar*. Assessment is compatible with a Western tradition of public display of knowledge and an American call for connection between knowledge and action.

We outline three main areas which together comprise an invitation for dialogue with the public. First, we address the politics of assessment. Second, we discuss the foundation for dialogue about the communication discipline. Third, we propose dialogic communication with the public as a way to create shared meaning about the process of communication.

The Politics of Assessment

Standards-based education is a major force for educational change at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels, which "represents a radical and pervasive shift that cannot be dismissed as transitory" (Mitchell, 1995, p. 7). The movement toward national goals and standards is already influencing postsecondary assessment. Higher education "is likely to be a focal point for further activity in that area in the next few years" (Lieb, 1994, p. 1).

Sykes (1988) articulated a dangerous and somewhat pervasive public perception--higher education needs to be accountable to those that provide voluntary (contributions) and forced support (taxes). Calls for accountability require accrediting agencies to demand assessment profiles that outline the worth, relevance, customer satisfaction, and perceived quality of a given education. We, in higher education, no longer work in an environment propelled by a public

trust that says "educate us." Instead a more appropriate slogan might be "show us." When communication begins with a demand, the opportunity for dialectic confrontation is present; dialogue can be present only when the value in each person's presentation is clear and understood.

> The public seek clarity of educational standards through educational reform: Educational standards are *explicit* statements describing the qualities of expected performance. From them follows curriculum, which can consist of anything reasonable and feasible that gets students to the standards but must be targeted toward them. Assessment also follows naturally asking how well students have attained the standards, not how well they have performed in the curriculum. (Mitchell, 1995, p. 7)

Dialogue involves a willingness to take seriously the questions of assessment which mark our historical era.

We must reject the temptation to underplay the power and the significance of the assessment effort today. Taking seriously the public's emphasis upon assessment lessens the likelihood that the communicative interaction between a faculty and the public will be guided solely by a confrontational dialectic of "our" position being challenged by "their" questions. We must acknowledge the legitimate intellectual roots and heritage of such questioning; we must reject the impulse to see all public skepticism as fueled by unbridled demands for power over another. Assessment is a logical extension of the intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment, which has been the engine, for good and ill, of the modern age in Western culture. Within the Enlightenment tradition we discover intellectual rationale and justification

for ideas being examined in the *public* domain and for the companion concern about intellectual elites.

The demand to "show us," to put information out for public review is not new. Bernstein (1983) reminded us of one of the major contributions of the Enlightenment--to bring discussion, information, and the pursuit of truth to the public domain. No longer could the Church limit or dictate what is or is not true; the private monopoly of the Church in the dispensing of truth edicts was over.

> Referring to the *philosophies* of the Enlightenment, whose importance [Hannah Arendt] says, lies in their shrewd insight into the *public* character of freedom, Arendt tells us: 'Their freedom was not an inner realm into which men might escape at will from the pressures of the world, nor was it the *liberum arbitrium* which makes the will choose between alternatives. Freedom for them could exist only in public; it was a tangible, worldly reality, something created by men to be enjoyed by men rather than a gift or a capacity, it was the man-made public space or market-place which antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and becomes visible to all.' (Bernstein, 1983, p. 209)

In the Enlightenment, truth was invited into the public domain, into the light of human observation and comment.

Clearly there is much debate on the value of the Enlightenment today (e.g., Foucault, 1973; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Lyotard, 1984). Quoting Habermas, Bernstein (1983) reminded us of the "dialectic of the Enlightenment" (p. 189). Habermas, Bernstein, and Arendt all point to the significance of the Enlightenment to assessment,

acknowledging the importance of the public domain for the discussion and consideration of ideas and action. As power was taken from the Church (private discernment), it was placed into the public arena for examination and verification.

In the current climate of public perception, there is little likelihood that the call for accountability and assessment will be abated. Our choice is what we will make of what we are required to do by a questioning public. Like it or not, we have a public that wants to make sure that they are shown what we are doing; and on American soil there is deep suspicion of elites who are unwilling to put their ideas out for public discussion. The next section outlines the intellectual foundation for historical suspicion on college campuses.

Foundation for Dialogue

The call for assessment voiced by a concerned public brings little cheer to many members of higher education. One might easily associate assessment requests with the work of Sykes (1988), Bloom (1987), and D'Souza (1991). At best, these voices try to rectify a dialectical imbalance in the debate; at worst, they move the conversation away from any point of common ground, making the invitation for dialogue increasingly difficult between opposing voices determined to ignore each other.

There are other dedicated and less extreme persons on university campuses who are suspicious of any public probing of the academy, and their suspicion needs to be met with respect. Just as the Enlightenment offered intellectual support for public inquiry, there is intellectual support for suspicion of the public from persons in higher education. This stance of suspicion is not new and is deeply ingrained in the academic culture. This aura of suspicion

exists as an invisible screen in campus culture, becoming visible in times of crisis and challenge to the potential intellectual autonomy of the campus.

The culture of higher education is grounded in a basic assumption: The integrity of the professorate to pursue knowledge and teaching is central to the continued discovery of truth. Our "community of memory" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, pp. 152-155) on the college campus calls for a commitment to academic freedom, if the academy is to survive as a place of free and creative inquiry. In concrete terms, the bestowing of tenure is a practical way to keep the notion of academic freedom alive and well on the campus--even if ideas or inquiry are contrary to the *status quo*.

As the public calls for more accountability, we, on the campus, remember the era shortly after World War II that misused public concern. Too many academics found their lives disrupted and their research carefully watched as a phenomenon of McCarthyism swept this country. As most faculty would state, "for such times and to combat such people" tenure was given birth. Tenure was put in place not to provide lifetime employment, but to protect a faculty member from outside interference from any part of the public that wanted to push a narrow ideology upon the faculty. Joughin (1969) recalled the Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure written in 1940 by The American Association of University Professors:

> Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition. (p. 34)

Tenure is an implementation strategy that seeks to keep an inquiring public from limiting the

scope and creative quality of higher education teaching and research.

During the mid-nineteenth century, many Americans traveled to Germany to study and acquire academic degrees. "Graduates from German degree programs eventually shaped our understanding of academic freedom around the terms *Lernfreiheit* (instructor rights) and *Lehrfreiheit* (student rights). *Lernfreiheit* suggested two things for the German educator: freedom of teaching and of inquiry" (Arnett, 1991, p. 7).

The academy has both an intellectual grounding and an implementation strategy that works out of a culture of suspicion--not for self-serving reasons, but to facilitate the pursuit of truth in teaching and scholarship. Suspicion on college campuses toward outside interference is equally supported by intellectual justification. The dialectic between the two camps--public and the campus--reveals rationale and historical support for each communicative position. Before inviting dialogue with a concerned public, educators must know their own intellectual history.

Dialogue with the public is invited when we present clear evidence that we know what we are doing--why a particular approach and a particular subject matter are explored, and the limits inherent in a given approach or interpretive understanding of historically situated subject matter. At a minimal level of conversation, we must publicly outline why a particular approach and a particular subject matter are explored. Additionally, we need to outline the particular limits inherent in a given approach or interpretive understanding of historically situated subject matter. We invite dialogue with the public rationale and limits of historically situated knowledge or we ignore the demands of a concerned public--at our own peril. Recent legislation *calls for our participation* in discussing the contributions of our discipline to social

change.

The National Education Goals (*Goals 2000*, 1994), especially the fifth national goal on literacy and lifelong learning are integral to communication education. "Objective five under that goal states: The proportion of college graduates who demonstrate an advance ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems will increase substantially" (Lieb, 1994, p. 1). The SCANS Report (1992) contains descriptions that include workplace skills and competencies related to the communication discipline. The "Basic Skills" in the SCANS matrix include "reading, writing, arithmetic and mathematics, speaking and listening." The "Thinking Skills" include "the ability to learn, to reason, to think creatively, to make decisions, and to solve problems." Student "Competencies" include "Interpersonal skills," exemplified by "work on teams, teaching others, serving customers, leading, negotiating, and working well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds" (Lieb, 1994; Newburger, 1996; SCANS, 1992).

Lieb (1994) noted "SCA members' experiences in instructing and assessing the performance of adults in these skills and competencies could contribute immensely to national efforts to assess America's workforce" (p. 7). Somewhere between an open embracing of assessment and an unthinking rejection of its use lies the ground for a cautious dialogue between two groups charged with different social responsibilities to the society in which we live.

Beginning the Dialogue

In this section, we identify three co-present elements necessary for dialogue with the public about educational assessment. First, we address opening the conversation beyond the academy. Next, we discuss the process of moving from dialectic to dialogue. Finally, we recall

that shared understanding of assessment issues is socially constructed through dialogue with the public.

Opening the Conversation. *Inviting dialogue with the public opens the conversation beyond an elite body.* We must reject the view of philosopher kings, capable of moving ideas into action without the benefit of the practical insight of others. On the other hand, there is a strong case for suspicion on the campus, as the public begins to move into the higher education arena--particularly when the intellectual support of the Enlightenment is now under severe postmodern critique.

The Enlightenment questioned elites; no longer could a small group dictate action without opportunity for others to enter the conversation. Like it or not, Sykes (1988) speaks for a growing number of higher education critics who wonder if academe has become another elite body reluctant to bring information, debate, and discussion into the public domain. We are not supporting Sykes, but we do want to place his probing of the academy within historical perspective. If the history of the Enlightenment tells us anything, it suggests that information held within private domains attracts a critical response.

There is an assumption that elites generate stories about the "good life" in the midst of abstraction and theory, leaving behind the praxis of everyday life needed for the development of human wisdom. Simply put, when like-minded people limit their conversations to discourse with one another, their ideas become more defined and refined; arguments over smaller and smaller differences occur. Self-reinforcing conversation offers stability, but also potential stagnation. Like-minded discussion does not offer the diversity needed for continual

paradigmatic shifts in thinking and implementation of ideas. The practical wisdom of the Enlightenment is needed to bring ideas into the public domain for discussion, critique, and invigoration away from incestuous conversation.

Today, we once again find multiple voices calling for public discussion. The renewed interest in democracy and public debate may be a sign of societal "health." We are beginning to recognize the need for such discussion. As an example, the National Endowment for the Humanities--through a funding initiative called National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity--has recently developed materials and made grants to state and local agencies to encourage conversation about the American identity and the challenges of living in a pluralistic society. Neither conservatives nor liberals have the right to limit public discussion of their ideas. The public may legitimately ask, "How will these ideas, when put into action, affect me, my family, my community, and this country?"

Fair or not, the public asks if conversation in the academe is limited to elites alone. Articulate voices, who are not part of a far right intellectual revival ask even more disturbingly kindred questions. The question of elites and public discussion is articulated in sophisticated fashion in Lasch's (1995) *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. Lasch reminded us of the necessity of the intellectual sorting/discernment process, which requires bringing ideas into the public domain for discussion:

> From William James and John Dewey: that our search for reliable information is itself guided by the questions that arise. . . . in public. . . . It is the act of articulating and defending our views that lift them out of the category of 'opinions,' gives them shape and

> definition, and makes it possible for others to recognize them as a description of their own experience as well. . . . We come to know our own minds only by explaining ourselves to others. (p. 170)

Lasch chose to emphasize the importance of keeping alive a quality contribution of the Enlightenment--public verification of truth and the importance of the wise person putting knowledge into practice in a manner sensitive to the "particulars" (Sherman, 1991). Once faculty understand the intellectual roots of assessment and the necessity of a public outline of why we engage in our pursuits and the limits of what we do in this historical moment, we have only initiated dialogue.

From Dialectic to Dialogue. *Dialogue permits dialectic opposition to help clarify positions.* Dialogue, in the case of assessment, cannot bypass a confrontational stage in which deeply differing communicative objections can find common ground without first clashing.

The hope of turning a dialectical confrontation into a dialogue begins with a willingness to attempt to understand another's position. The search for "common ground" (Maloy & Patterson, 1992) is initiated by interlocutors taking the time to understand the other's ground proposition. Hegel (1812/1922) was deeply tied to the notion of dialectic that was oppositional in nature. Gadamer (1980, 1986), in contrast, reminded us that the original intent of "dialectical" was the common search for meaning. Only by exploring the uniqueness of each side of an argument can one begin to locate common ground.

This insight into the connection of dialectic to dialogue is pointed to in Buber's (1972) view of distance prior to relation and the importance of knowing one's own position or ground

before speaking (Arnett, 1986). This view of dialogue pointed to by both Gadamer and Buber is content driven: One speaks from what one knows. Conviction alone does not carry a dialogue. The conversation needs to be content-filled. Dialectic discussion focuses attention on opposing content positions.

In Colorado, the Littleton case can be instructive, as persons on opposite sides tug on every local school district in the state--either advocating or refuting educational reform. Educators in Littleton responded to what they thought they heard society demanding: "graduate students who have knowledge and skills. They heard the politicians throughout the '80s clamor for educators to state explicitly what every high school student should know and be able to do in order to graduate" (Galluzzo, 1994a, p. A8). Littleton educators initiated an innovative approach, establishing "performance standards on which all students would have to demonstrate mastery before they would be given a diploma" (Galluzzo, 1994a, p. A8). Then something happened. In November 1993, elections were held for three open seats on the five-member Arapahoe County District 6 school board. Vying for the seats were three candidates who opposed outcome-based education and espoused basic teaching, and three candidates who advocated outcome-based education. All three persons who opposed outcome-based education won the election ("OBE opponents win," 1993, p. A7). In the midst of policy changes, the voice of the voting public was heard, and it did *not* support educational reform.

Dialectical inquiry uncovers content that needs to be understood well by both parties. To know one's own position well requires understanding the opposition, in order to generate the highest quality of refutation. Additionally, to know one's own position very well permits well-

argued ideas to be tested. If one does change positions, the shift will most likely be the result of encountering ideas not previously considered, perhaps in the form of hearing voices not well represented by others.

Awareness of dialectical tension between positions can open the door to dialogue, if the parties can embrace the goal of attempting to genuinely understand their own and the other's position. Following passage of HB 1313, which requires Colorado schools to develop and implement educational standards of accountability, Colorado Commission for Achievement in Education member Dan Morris (then President of the Colorado Education Association) asked, "'How do we prepare teachers to do this? . . . If this is really to be successful, staff has to be prepared, and that requires a significant commitment.' He estimated that 'to do it right' would cost millions of dollars over the next five years" ("Commission," 1993, p. A3). State Representative Pat Sullivan, who proposed HB 1313, said he "firmly believes that the majority of Colorado citizens won't support increased school funding until they see tangible evidence of improved academic achievement" (Sullivan, 1993, p. A11). Within the next few years, similar presentations may be made with respect to higher education.

For a dialogue with the public to take place, we must understand of the heritage of the positions that drive the call for public discussion of higher education, on the one hand, and campus suspicion of public intervention in higher education. Neither the concern of the public for assessment, nor the concern of educators about public intervention on the campus can be ignored. Accrediting agencies abound in higher education--from governmental to professional accreditation. Such agencies are here to stay and their power will only grow more significant

and more closely tied to assessment; or some other organization will emerge to do the task "better," if needed.

As John Dewey, the first President of the American Association of University Professors, stated:

> If this profession should prove itself unwilling to purge its ranks of the incompetent and the unworthy, or to prevent the freedom which it claims in the name of science from being used as a shelter for inefficiency, for superficiality, or for uncritical and intemperate partisanship, it is certain that the task will be performed by others--by others who lack certain essential qualifications for performing it, and whose action is sure to breed suspicions and recurrent controversies deeply injurious to the internal order and the public standing of universities. (Joughin, 1969, p. 170)

Yet at the same time this organization was formed to protect academic freedom. Dewey, in his pragmatic style, understood the dialectical nature of this opposing set of concerns--neither of which can be ignored.

After understanding one's own position and understanding the other's position, letting dialectical differences be heard, we must work to counter two major communicative tendencies in our own historical moment: the emphasis on the privatized self and the diminished role of the public in contemporary life. Both these communicative issues need attention if our invitation to dialogue is going to have a chance. We increase our hope of moving from dialectic to dialogue as rationale for opposing positions becomes clear.

Social Construction of Dialogue. *Invitation to dialogue envisions communication as*

socially constructed. Both self and other are central to the emergence of "truth." We must reject the assumptive base of the "self" as embodiment of truth. Truth is pursued with the other, not alone.

With an intellectual history of suspicion and the reinforcement of concern expressed by the public in the 50s, and then the 60s, it is not surprising that many in the academy approached assessment efforts with great caution. Often many of us did what was needed to pass assessments in the midst of a given external review, but no more. We went through the motions of doing what was necessary to satisfy the "watchers" at a minimal level. We believed privately and sometimes publicly that uninvited public interest in higher education was motivated by the worst of base impulses, i.e., "big brother" watching what liberal faculty might say to their constituents. The point is not that faculty are suspicious, but that there is a history of intellectual support for such a deep sense of caution.

Some of us who were educated in the study of interpersonal communication in an era of "humanistic psychology" and "encounter groups" were told to envision truth as grounded in the private self. This position is articulated by MacIntyre (1984) *After Virtue*, in which he outlined the origin and limits of what he calls "emotivism." In addition, a number of authors have responded to McIntyre's work with interpretive questions pointing to similar concerns, such as misuse of a privatized view of self (Bellah, et al., 1985; Hart & Burks, 1972; Lasch, 1995; Rieff, 1966/1987; Sennett, 1977). These scholars suggested that placing the pursuit of truth within the private domain works only if one believes that the human is innately good and infinitely wise or that societal truth can be found through mystical understanding of the self. If one accepts a

social constructivist view of interpersonal communication (Pearce, 1994), answers to communicative complexities are found in interaction, not a focus on self.

Barrett (1991) used material from Rapaport to underscore the limits of privatized self or solipsism in the pursuit of truth, which misses an understanding of an audience, the public:

> David Rapaport extends Piaget's view that social influence is necessary to meet narcissistic limitations. His prescription calls for perspectives of a variety of good audiences. His terms have rhetorical meaning: 'Only the implicit reactions and explicit communications of a variety of other 'mes' can free 'me' from its solipsism (autism) by providing mirrors to reflect various sides of the 'me.'" (p. 163)

There is a limitation placed upon the person accepting a view of communication that begins with the assumption of self as the primary place of focus, instead of the more complex ground of social construction between persons. Beginning interpersonal communication with a private set of assumptions about the self moves us from the public arena into a private view of truth. As scholarship reified the "self" in the last twenty-five years, we have moved to an emotive and privatized discernment of truth that is inflicted upon a public. In short, we feel compelled to argue with the intensity of our feelings, not with evidence available for public examination.

This focus on the self and privatized truth would make any person critical of an "invasion" of questioning from the public. When the public holds an inferior place to privatized truth centered upon the self, a form of solipsism or autism that ignores interaction with a larger audience is fostered. Such a view is theologically sectarian, psychologically autistic, philosophically a form of solipsism, and politically elite. This perspective is narrow and rejects

a dialogue of diversity in the public arena, seeking instead to protect turf sacred to the self--a similar motivation to that of the Church during the Enlightenment and the Reformation. Ironically, the Enlightenment fought to wrestle truth from the private clutches of the Church, only to have a twentieth century world attempt to privatize truth once again within the confines of self. With the evolution of the privatized focus on the self, it is little wonder that the public domain has suffered.

The university has been a part of this era of self, like the rest of society. We have talked about our careers, or enjoyment of the lifestyle of a campus, but less conversation is heard about the calling to a form of public service, whether on a state campus or at a private university. Jacoby (1987) lamented the declining number of public intellectuals willing to write for and address a large audience--a public unwilling to see the academy as a private place requiring coded language between the players and protection from the outside.

Many taxpayers listening to critiques of public universities ask for increased attention to the public. Even constituents of private universities want to know whether research and teaching is propelled by public concern or private agendas. What is called for is an increased sense of responsibility to the public and a willingness to assume the "role" of a professor which has a public set of responsibilities beyond the concern for self and career development. The idea of identifying educators' responsibilities to the public and of the role of a professor to usher in the next generation of leaders is not new. These "public" ideas have been uttered by a large number of major educators. Hutchins (1953), Newman (1959), Gamson, Black, Catlin, Hill, Nichols, and Rogers (1984), Boyer (1989), and Barzun (1991) each point to the public

responsibility of the University. Their vision was much greater than "my" own "privatized" view of the university, "my" career, or "my"' students.

Pelikan (1992) in *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* continues to dialogue with the nineteenth century futuristic insight of Cardinal Newman. Following the lead of Cardinal Newman, Pelikan pointed out one public concern after another: The university is to be concerned about service--intellectual and ethical--to the public. Such concerns are "fitting and right" (Pelikan, 1992, p. 156). But Pelikan reminded us that the public demands of service are now accompanied by requests for public displays of accountability.

Dialogue begins with a reevaluation of the importance of the notion of public. *Dialogue is not just a private intimate act, but can and must be able to take us into the public domain--the place where socially constructed knowledge occurs.* A friend asked, "Who bears the burden to move the discussion from dialectic to dialogue--the public or us, the academy?" The obvious answer is both. However, in the spirit of this practical philosophical essay, we suggest another answer. Dialogue cannot be forced. It must be invited. We cannot force another person to engage in dialogue. But we can invite the communicative ingredients where dialogue might begin to flourish.

The above discussion of dialogue constitutes a rudimentary road map for the invitation of dialogue--the movement from dialectic to dialogue between the academy and the public. The call for assessment does offer the chance to turn a problem into an opportunity, as the cliche suggests. Assessment is upon us; the opportunity for dialogue awaits.

Summary

This essay points to a cautious dialogue between higher education and the public, within an Enlightenment tradition that calls for public description of the rationale and limits of our knowledge base. The key to this dialogue is knowing the ground on which one stands, and then entering the conversation with a cautious openness to the other. We need to know our own presuppositions and those of our interlocutors.

Outlining the rationale and limits to historically situated work contributes to the diversity of interpretive options within the scholarly community. The public is given basic interpretive knowledge about our approach, its significance and limits. Assessment can actually help us, the academy, to understand ourselves more fully. Diversity only contributes to dialogue when contextually appropriate disclosure of particular orientations is offered. Thus, we must outline the uniqueness of approaches and limits--defending our intellectual position in the public arena in a cautious dialogue that reminds us to be wary of too much intervention from an inquiring public, while listening to the other.

In this dialogue, the wise communicator seeks to understand that the line between propaganda and education is crossed when an awareness of alternatives is kept from the other (Buber, 1972). However, the wise communicator does not ignore that dialogue around assessment is not to be taken for granted. Both sides have a heritage that propels them, and both have reason to be cautious.

Commitment to ongoing change and improvement is not tantamount to condemning what has been done in the past. Rather, commitment to continuous improvement is the very

> essence of what a university should be; it reflects an effort to discover and incorporate new ideas and directions because they promise to help us do even better what we are already doing well. We expect tangible products to evolve and improve over time, if they are to hold a place in competitive markets. (Griffith, 1993, p. 7)

The wise communicator is careful, but in the midst of all the documentation and struggles in the assessment effort there is a hope fueled by the praxis of dialogue. If opposing voices can work together on the campus with the public, perhaps our entrance into the twenty-first century will be enhanced from the praxis of cautious dialogue--dialogue which invites the highest quality of education that a community of discourse can envision.

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